Unit .07

Session .04

The Promise of God's Presence

Scripture

Deuteronomy 31:14-23; 32:44-47

14 The LORD said to Moses, "The time of your death is now approaching. Call Joshua and present yourselves at the tent of meeting so that I may commission him." When Moses and Joshua went and presented themselves at the tent of meeting, **15** the LORD appeared at the tent in a pillar of cloud, and the cloud stood at the entrance to the tent. **16** The LORD said to Moses, "You are about to rest with your fathers, and these people will soon prostitute themselves with the foreign gods of the land they are entering. They will abandon me and break the covenant I have made with them. **17** My anger will burn against them on that day; I will abandon them and hide my face from them so that they will become easy prey. Many troubles and afflictions will come to them. On that day they will say, 'Haven't these troubles come to us because our God is no longer with us?' **18** I will certainly hide my face on that day because of all the evil they have done by turning to other gods. **19** Therefore write down this song for yourselves and teach it to the Israelites; have them sing it, so that this song may be a witness for me against the Israelites. **20** When I bring them into the land I swore to give their fathers, a land flowing with milk and honey, they will eat their fill and prosper. They will turn to other gods and worship them, despising me and breaking my covenant. **21** And when many troubles and afflictions come to them, this song will testify against them, because their descendants will not have forgotten it. For I know what they are prone to do, even before I bring them into the land I swore to give them." **22** So Moses wrote down this song on that day and taught it to the Israelites. **23** The LORD commissioned Joshua son of Nun, "Be strong and courageous, for you will bring the Israelites into the land I swore to them, and I will be with you." …

44 Moses came with Joshua son of Nun and recited all the words of this song in the presence of the people. **45** After Moses finished reciting all these words to all Israel, **46** he said to them, "Take to heart all these words I am giving as a warning to you today, so that you may command your children to follow all the words of this law carefully. **47** For they are not meaningless words to you but they are your life, and by them you will live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess."

Intro Options

Main Point:
God warns of the consequences of unfaithfulness to Him.

Option 1

Transitioning into a new leadership position can be quite difficult. Whether taking over as the new teacher in a class midway through the year, or stepping in as a new coach for a team that has functioned quite well under a retiring beloved coach, the challenges can be numerous. Those who have experienced transitions like these—either as the leader transitioning in, or as a subordinate under new leadership—can testify that new leadership can often be disruptive. It can shake the status quo and culture of an organization, for better or worse.

- **Describe some challenges you have faced when stepping into a new position of leadership or when following a new leader. How did you respond to these difficulties? What helped you navigate the transition?**

As we reach Deuteronomy 31, we encounter the people of Israel about to experience a significant leadership change during a climactic time in their history—their entrance into the promised land. Such a leadership change in such a critical moment could have been devastating for God's people. But we will see that this change would not—and could not—affect the promises that God had made to His people. Even with the skills and giftedness of their new leader, Joshua, it would be God who would continue to go before His people to assure each of His promises would come to fruition.

Option 2

- **What are some warnings you often hear from authority figures in your life?**

While sometimes unpleasant to hear, warnings and reminders are ultimately good. Local weather stations give up-to-date warnings of hazardous weather developing in an area. No one wants to hear of dangerous weather near them, but the warnings help preserve lives. Department of Transportation give real-time information warning people of traffic developments and road closures. No one enjoys traffic, but it is good to know what to expect. Parents offer continual warnings and reminders to their children because they can see potential danger their kids often cannot (or choose not to) see. These warnings may be frightening to a child, but that fear is better than experiencing the danger.

God's providision of faithful warnings and reminders for us in Scripture not only testifies to the graciousness of His character, but also to His desire to see us choose what is right, knowing that the consequences are a matter of life and death for us.

TEACHING PLAN

Read Deuteronomy 31:14-18

The beginning of Deuteronomy 31 tells us that Moses was 120 years old when Joshua replaced him as leader of Israel (v. 2). Not only that, but the text also reminds us that Moses would not cross the Jordan and enter the promised land with the people because of his act of disobedience when he struck the rock twice for water to come out (Num. 20:1-12).

Now, one could easily imagine this transition destroying the morale of the people. After all, Moses had been their leader for all of these years. But instead of seeing the people collapse or divide, or a leader cling to power as long as he was able (which is usually longer than he should), we see a clean transition of leadership among the people of God. No fights. No quarrels. Just change from Moses to Joshua, highlighting the important fact that Israel's true leader wasn't a human, but the God who created them. In fact, Moses was instructed not only to hand over the title and role of "leader," but to be part of commissioning his successor. God called Moses and Joshua to the tent of meeting, and it was there that God's presence manifested in the form of a cloud (v. 14-15). It is telling that God chose not merely to speak to Moses and Joshua in this moment, but to be with them as well.

Activity

The theme of God wanting to dwell among His people is a common theme throughout Scripture. Have students break up into groups and come up with a list of instances of where this theme occurs in Scripture. You can even make it into a contest and reward the groups accordingly.

Our journey through the storyline of Scripture thus far has already born witness many times to God's desire to dwell among His people. It started in the Garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve were to live blissfully in God's presence under God's loving rule. We saw it at Mt. Sinai, where God invited the people into His presence, wanting them to be a kingdom of priests (Ex. 19:6,13). And we saw it with the construction of the ark and tabernacle, where God's presence manifested among the people (Ex. 36–40). This biblical motif doesn't end here; it will continue throughout Scripture with the temple, the incarnation of Jesus, and on the day of Pentecost when the Spirit of God indwelled God's people—all underscoring this profound and fundamental reality: God wants to dwell among His children.

- **How can the biblical motif of God dwelling among His people help us in those moments when we feel as if He isn't near?**

99 Essential Doctrines *(p. 32, DDG)*

Enslaved to Sin

Because of the fall of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, all of humanity has inherited a sin nature that inclines them toward sin and rebellion. Human beings are enslaved to sin (Rom. 6:17), continually living with the propensity to transgress God's commandments whenever possible. It isn't until one experiences salvation through the work of Christ that he or she is able to overcome sin's enslavement through the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:2).

COMMENTARY

Main Point:
God warns of the consequences of unfaithfulness to Him.

Deuteronomy 31

14-18. God is omniscient, meaning He has perfect knowledge of all things—past, present, and future. Where we know some things, and can predict what will happen occasionally at times, God knows all things. His knowledge is complete, as the One who brought this world, including time, into existence. Thus, God knew exactly what would become of the Israelites once they settled into the land of promise.

This language of prostitution, unfaithfulness, abandonment, and breaking the covenant are also used throughout Scripture in the context of marriage. God designed marriage to be a covenant relationship where both the man and the woman are to live exclusively and faithfully with one another. This language is used by God here to accentuate the intimate relationship we are to have with our God. But because of the Israelite's unfaithfulness—not God's—they would not experience the fullness of what God intended. God will hide His face from them—for a time and for the purpose of restoration—because the people would break their covenant vows.

19-22. Many familiar children's stories and nursery rhymes of today have somewhat of a dark origin. Written centuries ago across different parts of Europe, these classic tales served as pedagogical tools for parents to teach their children historic or moral lessons in a memorable way. Ring around the Rosie was a rhyme that originated during Europe's fourteenth-century Great Plague, which claimed the lives of nearly one-third of the world's population at the time. The tale of Hansel and Gretel was intended to teach children to understand destruction comes from greed, not to wander off into the woods alone, and not to trust strangers. And now, centuries later, we still tell the stories and sing the songs! Why? Because the medium of story, rhyme, or song is a powerful vehicle for communicating a message. An important message needs a powerful medium of delivery.

In Defense *(p. 34, DDG)*

In this account we see a strong and powerful motif within Scripture in that God wants to dwell among us! The Creator of the universe, the holy and all-powerful God, wants to be involved in the day-to-day aspects of our lives. This fundamental Christian theme is radically different from the other religions of the world. For them, it is about working our way to God, while Christianity is about God coming down to dwell among us. Theirs are religions of earning enough credits to somehow please God and be rewarded by Him, whereas Christianity is about receiving God's gift of friendship and righteousness through the reconciling work of His Son, Jesus Christ, which results in life-long communion with Him that extends to all eternity.

TEACHING PLAN

Read Deuteronomy 31:19-22

God commissions Joshua as Israel's next leader (v. 23), the primary reason for His arrival, but God doesn't spend the majority of time on that subject. Instead, God tells Moses what His people will do after He gives them the land promised to their fathers. In short, God told Moses that the Israelites would "prostitute" themselves with the false gods of the surrounding nations—that they would abandon Him and break the covenant He had made with them.

God not only told Moses how the people would turn from Him, but also how He would respond to their unfaithfulness. If the people wanted to chase after other gods, He would allow them to do just that. God would withdraw from His people, and in that withdrawal would come the loving discipline of God. On that day the people would no longer have God going before them to fight their battles. Instead, His face would be hidden from them, and they would face the consequences of their idolatry.

- **How does God's response to the Israelites' idolatry serve as a warning to us about harboring modern-day idols of the heart?**

God could have stopped after telling Moses what the people would do after settling in the land and how He would act in response, but He didn't. God wanted His people not only to hear this message, but to take it to heart and remember it. So He took it a step further and instructed Moses to write what He had shared in none other than a song. This song was to be sung by generation after generation to serve as a warning and reminder of what would happen if the people abandoned God and turned to the idols that surrounded them.

- **Why do you think God wanted this message to be communicated through song?**

Yet, even in the midst of these sobering lyrics we find a hopeful promise. We read in Deuteronomy 32:43, "Rejoice, you nations, concerning his people, for he will avenge the blood of his servants. He will take vengeance on his adversaries, he will purify his land and his people." God would not give up on His promise to bless the nations through Israel. The people would abandon God, find themselves in a position of judgment, and be unable to find deliverance through the powerless pagan gods (v. 15-38), but God would never abandon them. Not only will He vindicate them before their enemies, He will also purify them in the land of promise. This is the promise the Israelites would need to cling to. This is the message of hope. Even when they acted as if they were finished with God, He was not finished with them, and He would continue to work in them so that He might work through them.

This hopeful promise once again testifies to God's faithfulness in carrying out His side of the covenant. Even though a future generation of Israelites would turn from Him, He would not turn away from carrying out the rescue mission He had described to their father Abraham. Yes, He would discipline the people for their sin. Yes, He would withdraw His protective measures surrounding them for a time. But it wouldn't be forever.

- **How are we beneficiaries of God's faithfulness to the Israelites? What does this say about His love for the nations today?**

COMMENTARY

Main Point:
God warns of the consequences of unfaithfulness to Him.

The lyrics of the song are laid out in Deuteronomy 32, and in them, Moses covers everything God had told him in the tent of meeting recorded in the previous chapter. Few people would think of Moses' song as a cheerful one; it details the death and destruction of the Israelites as a result of their sin and unfaithfulness. However, the song does not exclude the cause of this death and destruction: the people's persistent idolatry. This is what God wanted the people to grasp: how their sin would eventually lead to this outcome. The Israelites' singing served to remind them that God is holy, and a holy God cannot overlook sin and injustice—otherwise God would fail to be God. Love does not avoid; love confronts. And our loving God is a God who confronts His people for His glory and our good, sometimes even in song.

Of course, it is important to recognize that God was not delighting in what was in store for His people. He didn't want this situation to unfold. He didn't desire to be abandoned by His people. He didn't delight in the fact that they would one day give their allegiance and affection to the false gods of the surrounding nations. He didn't want any of that, which is why He instructed Moses to write this down in song so that the people would have a persistent tune in their heads of what would happen if they chose to abandon Him.

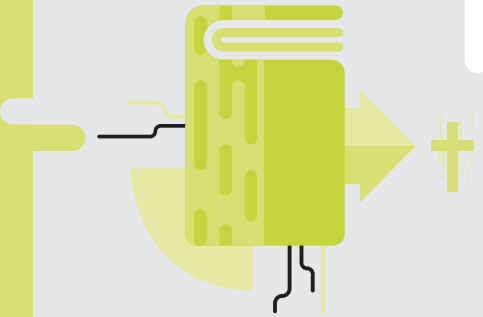
Deuteronomy 32

44-47. Moses' description of God's word as leading to life points us back to Deuteronomy 8:3, where he said that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. You may know that verse from somewhere else, though. When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, He quoted it to the devil, showing us what it looks like to live upon the word of God. Jesus succeeded where Israel failed. Satan tried his usual tactic of twisting God's word to inflict doubt about what God had said, but Jesus stood resolute and unshaken in His confidence in the word of the Lord. Israel, on the other hand, would give in to temptation and disregard the warnings found in God's word. They would fail to live upon the word of God and live on their own fears and desires instead.

As with most of the other people we encounter in Scripture, we should look at the Israelites as if we were looking into a mirror—the same failures, doubts, and unbelief we see in them are the ones we find in ourselves. This is why it is so important for us to remember our goal isn't to keep working on our image until we are happy with what we see in the reflection, but to tilt the mirror upward and behold the One who has the power to transform us into His image—the Word made flesh. We are not to rest in who we are, but to be restless to see God change us to be more like Him.

(p. 33, DDG) Christ Connection

Despite the people's ongoing sinful rebellion, God promised to be with them and provided them with words of life. Jesus is the Word of God who paid the penalty of our sin so that we might have life and relationship with God.



THE PROMISE OF GOD'S PRESENCE

Deuteronomy 31:14–23; 32:44–47

THE PROMISE OF GOD'S PRESENCE

God warns of the consequences of unfaithfulness to Him.

JESUS CONNECTION

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LIFEWISE QUALITY

COMMITMENT – Doing what I say I'll do.

HEAD

What did God say the people would do after they settled in the land of Canaan? What promise does God make Joshua, despite this?

What two things does Moses encourage the Israelites to do in order to help them remain committed to God?

HEART

When Moses reminded the people of God's covenant, they said, "Yes! We'll do it all." But they continued to fall short of keeping their commitment. Have you ever said you would do something (clean your room, complete your homework on time, go to church, help a grandparent, etc.) and fell short of keeping that commitment? Why are you unable to keep your commitments at times?

God told Moses before he even died that the people would not stay committed to Him. God is not surprised by our sins or failures either. Jesus came to die so that our sins could be covered. How does it encourage you that God knows you aren't perfect and has already provided the perfect answer to your failures?

HANDS

As we depend on God, He will help us follow through on all the things we promise to do. Name one commitment you have made that you are struggling to keep. Ask God to help you be strong and courageous, and remember that He is with you always as you work to fulfill your commitment. Ask someone to keep you accountable. Have that person check in with you to make sure you are doing what you said you will do.